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ABSTRACT

The Right to Read Effort was established to help eliminate illiteracy in the United States. Major thrusts involve translating research and placing it in the hands of practitioners, the coordination of basic planning at the local school level, retraining existing personnel, and insisting on individualized and personalized reading instruction. Guidelines issued to the 31 of the 50 states involved in the Right to Read Effort ask the states to assess their existing resources, to look at their certification rules and regulations and their impact on the teaching of reading, and to provide technical assistance to their local districts. Thus far, the Right to Read Effort has employed some 47 experts in reading as technical assistants, established 106 demonstration projects and additional special projects, and appointed 31 Right to Read Directors. Schools throughout the country have exemplified the efforts of Right to Read. Policies and practices which are being explored for future dissemination through Right to Read include preschool education, bilingual instruction, parental participation, adult education, and effective developmental programs. One of the main missions of the Right to Read Effort is to continue to develop ways of utilizing what has already been learned. (HOD)

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THE ASSUMPTIVE BASIS OF RIGHT TO READ

New Solutions for Old Problems

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First of all, I would like to thank all of you for coming to Washington for this conference. At this stage in Right to Read's development, I think it is important that all of us who have been chiefly involved get together. We need to see where we are and where we are going. To do this, it's important to realize where we've been.

I am especially pleased to address this group because you are the initiators, the pioneers of the Right to Read movement. This national effort requires each of us to break out of our restricted ways of looking at educational projects. Because we are compelled to implement programs, not education bandaid or appendages, I believe you as a group are uniquely qualified to play a larger role in this movement. Like most movements we must not become static for progress is the key to success. For a few moments then permit me to address where we are, where we must go and how you can assist. As the "Right to Read 500", that is the first funded programs, your role in the future strategy and direction is imperative.

The cycle for most federal programs goes something like this--projects launched, funded, demonstrated, attacked, de-funded and the cycle starts again.

A friend of mine in the business world has an interesting little essay in his office. It is carefully framed and placed above his desk, he says, as a constant reminder of how too often we dilude ourselves into thinking we've made real progress when in fact we haven't gotten anywhere at all.

The essay is entitled, "How to Run Away From a Problem." When I read it, I couldn't help but think it looked like a blueprint for America's efforts during the past several decades at solving its illiteracy problem.

"Profess not to have the answer," it begins. "That lets you out of having any." Then it goes on as follows, and I quote:

"Say that we must not move too rapidly. This avoids the necessity of getting started."

"For every proposal, set up an opposite one and conclude that the middle ground, which is no movement whatsoever, represents the wisest course of action."

"Say that the problem cannot be separated from other problems. Therefore, it can't be solved until all the other problems are solved"

"Ask what is meant by the question the problem poses. By the time it is clarified, it will be too late to do anything about it."

Delivered December 6, 1973, at Right to Read Conference, Shoreham Americana Hotel, Washington, D.C.

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"Appoint a committee without clarifying its purpose."

"Wait until an expert can be consulted."

"Point out how the deepest minds have struggled with the same problem. This implies that you deserve credit for even having thought of it. It also lets you off the hook for not having solved it."

"State in conclusion that you have clarified your thinking. This obscures the fact that nothing has been done."

The little essay closed by thanking the problem for existing. Why? The essay thanks the problem because it has "stimulated the discussion, contributed to our growth, opened up new vistas, showed us the way and challenged our inventiveness."

Sound familiar? It should.

For too long, America--the richest industrial nation in the world--had had an acute reading problem. You've all heard about National Assessment. Well, its latest survey of reading achievement shows that 20 to 30 percent of the young people in the United States cannot satisfactorily complete various reading tasks. These range from understanding words and word relationships to critical reading.

The survey also shows that 10-year olds perform less well in tests of reading comprehension than the same age group in nine other countries. Worse, the problem increases as the children proceed through the system. By the end of the high school years, U.S. students' achievement falls below that of students in 12 other countries.

Even before these frightening new figures were released, we in this country knew for more than a generation that there was an immense reading problem. Estimates based on results of a Louis Harris Poll had indicated that some 19 million U.S. adults are functionally illiterate and that some 7 million youngsters under the age of 16 will become functionally illiterate adults.

That means, simply, that we knew there were some 26 million Americans who could not read well enough to fill out a driver's license application or take a written test or even apply for a job.

And yet for years, America professed not to have the answer--thinking, of course, that let us out of having an answer.

We said the problem of illiteracy was complicated and that we must not mode too rapidly. That avoided the necessity of getting started on a solution.

For every proposal that was made to wipe out illiteracy, others set up opposite proposals and the reading effort was divided into warring camps between the phonics people and the look-say people. The experts concluded that the middle ground--not moving in any direction nationwide--was the wisest course of action.

Some school people said that the problem of reading could not be separated from all of the other problems of society. They pointed rightly to the fact that there is a direct correlation between reading achievement and family income. But they concluded wrongly that the problem of illiteracy could therefore not be solved until America had solved the problem of better housing, more jobs, and even integration.

Well, I think you get the idea of what I'm trying to say without taking each of the paragraphs in the little essay and applying it to the problem of illiteracy in this country.

But all of that began changing in 1969, when the late James E. Allen, Jr., then Commissioner of Education, announced plans for a nationwide effort to wipe out illiteracy in the United States.

The goal, he said, was to insure that by 1980, 99 percent of all people under 16 years of age and 90 percent of those over 16 years of age and 90 percent of those over 16 living in the United States would be functionally literate.

In order for all of us to fully appreciate the broad scope of Right to Read, some historical perspective is necessary. Education like most of the social and basic sciences goes through phases and fads. Right to Read was launched or announced when the public and educators were calling for a transfer from categorical to general aid. It was felt by some that ESEA should have handled Right to Read. As the concept of insuring the Right to Read to all people, limited Congressional attention was being paid to educational resources. If the American public decides that a literate society is essential for a democratic nation, viable mechanism will be generated and incorporated on a wide scale.

Although Right to Read has enjoyed wide acceptance, many still ask, do we have a problem. The pervasiveness of reading and literacy as a crisis is revealed in the devastating statistics and the alarming numbers of high school graduates with reading difficulties.

The Right to Read Effort was established in the U.S. Office of Education here, in July, 1971 and I was asked to come to Washington to head the program. I decided, even before I left California, that if we were to get anywhere near reaching the goal, we would have to think positively and do things differently.

We would have to articulate some answers in this case--because in fact we did and do have the answers. Research translation in the area of reading was essential. A primary challenge was taking the research off those shelves and placing it into the hands of those who could make use of it--the teachers, administrators, specialists, and other practitioners.

We said we must move rapidly and we have moved rapidly. We have done this through careful planning.

Many of you have been involved in developing programs, existing programs at the school level, the community level and the state level. Utilizing a systematic approach to needs assessment and program planning, you have forged ahead new ways of looking at old problems in our public schools and the community at large.

By developing new concepts and new ways of doing things, we have moved beyond the institutional obsolescence that has penalized public schools and many of other public institutions for too long.

We have said, for instance, that basic planning must be done at the same point where the changes are to be made. That means, for instance, at a local school, not the school district's central office, and certainly not the state or federal levels. At these levels, coordination of basic planning is or should be the goal.

We have said, too, that if one wants financial help, technical help must be accepted. We did this because we knew that too often, federal funds had been given away to those who would have spent the money more widely and more effectively if they had only been shown how. Nor surprisingly, when we demanded we supply technical assistance, the local people were eager to have our help.

Our second major thrust has been in the area of staff development. We have said that you must retrain existing personnel, not just hire new people for your programs. It would be easy to add layers of new people who would have to be removed as soon as the funds from the federal government had been used up. But since Right to Read believes basically in the concept that people will make the difference, it has preferred to spend its resources on those people who are going to make the difference. That means those who will still be around when the federal dollars are gone.

Leadership is an essential component in Right to Read whether at the district, community or state levels. In the demonstration school, principals are the program directors, thereby providing the instructional leadership commonly espaused but seldom implemented. Right to Read, in funding management seminars have endeavored to offer meaningful staff development for principals and their assistants.

The same is true for our community and adult programs. Our money has gone into inservice training for already-hired teachers, aides, librarians and administrators. Innovative programs to increase literacy has operated in 74 centers through the country.

Our third major area of interest has been individualized instruction. Where others had grouped children on the basis of age, Right to Read has insisted on individual diagnoses, knowing children of the same age often have very differing needs.

The very basis of many of our programs has, therefore, been individualized and personalized reading instruction. We know that good reading instruction is contingent not only on the teacher's having an expertise in reading instruction but on an understanding of the individual child, as well.

Right to Read has, as you know, emphasized diagnosing the individual needs of every child and prescribing in multiple ways to meet those needs. Therefore, we feel that we have given credence to the whole concept of individualized instruction and set an example for teachers in other fields of study. We have proven it can and does work.

Because Right to Read focusses far beyond the disadvantaged or target group child, it embraces the entire school in an effort to reach all children, all staff and all parents. Demonstrating systemic change is a viable concept and reading is the primary vehicle for altering the school as an institution.

By adding new kinds of reading materials and encouraging diversity, by letting children choose those books and other reading materials they themselves find interesting, we have been able to forge new trails in individualized and personalized reading instruction.

And so you see, we have been careful with out planning, careful to see that local staffs were properly retrained, and careful to make sure that each child in the program was offered individualized training especially designed to meet his or her own needs. But all of these efforts would have reached only a handful of the millions of children and adults we need to reach if it had not been for our fourth major area of concern--dissemination.

Our first priority in this area was to make the public aware of the enormity of the problem. We needed to get the attention of all Americans so that they would know there is indeed an immense reading and literacy problem in this nation.

And this has not been easy. It is difficult if not impossible for some people to understand the dimensions of illiteracy in a country that is as affluent as the United States--a country that can place a man on the moon and support foreign aid yet allow nearly 26 percent of its own population remain illiterate. So you can see the dissemination of information to the public at large has been and will continue to be a vital part of the Right to Read Effort.

In terms of progress, Right to Read calls particular attention to the role of the states in the national effort. As you know, we in this country have a state system of education. As I indicated to a foreigner recently who visited my office, the United States does not have a national system of education. Our schools are as different from Mississippi to Michigan as they are from Arkansas to Alaska. There are inherent strengths and weaknesses in such a system.

Our role in Right to Read has been to play up the strengths and avoid the weaknesses. We have done this by making each State Department of Education as strong as possible a delivery system for our programs. And we have done this with very limited resources.

We have been fortunate to have involved 31 of the 50 states in Right to Read's effort. In each of these 31, a Right to Read Director has been appointed. All of them have one thing in common. They are concerned, competent individuals who intend to make Right to Read grow and flourish in their states.

Our guidelines issued to Right to Read states asks them to first assess their existing resources. Here again, before they add any Right to Read layers to to their bureaucracy, we want them to know what is already available in existing resources in terms of reading.

One of the foundations on which Right to Read is predicated is that it will go about the business of coordinating a variety of approaches to the problem of illiteracy. You notice I carefully differentiated between the words coordinate and administer.

We ask the states to take a look at all of the programs they now have and find ways in which they, as states, can have an impact on the improvement of reading district-wide. They are what we would consider super technical assistants at the local level.

Since certification of teachers is another responsibility of the state, we also asked them to look at their certification rules and regulations and their impact on the teaching of reading. Why, for instance, should a prospective teacher be required to take six units of physical education and eight of music, yet only three of reading instruction in order to be credentialed?

We have also asked the states to provide technical assistance to their local districts. They are asked to utilize Right to Read material, processes and programs in a variety of ways and to provide expertise in the areas of educational planning and reading instruction.

So you can see that many states have had to develop a completely new kind of relationship with the federal government because of Right to Read. And the U.S. Office of Education has, likewise, had to develop a new kind of partnership with the states. It has been an exciting adventure for both.

The panel will address more specifics in terms of states.

It seems obvious, then, that Right to Read has accomplished a lot since it became a full-fledged program in mid-1971. We have employed some 47 experts in the area of reading and educational planning and used them as technical assistants throughout the nation.

We have funded and helped establish 106 demonstration projects, 51 additional special programs in desegregation areas, helped turn 31 of the 50 states into full-committed Right to Read states, and established a variety of other special projects which--like those mentioned--all have a multiplier factor built into them that will help spread Right to Read programs to their neighbors.

But our goal is an awesome one and our deadline is not far off. We simply must do more--and do it quickly. To do this, we need the help of others in the federal government in the private sector.

In addition, we have had to disseminate information about solutions to the problem, as well as the problem itself.

We have had to discover which programs are working and find out why, then let those in the field have this information. We have been able to identify many promising reading programs throughout the nation, funded by a variety of sources and using a variety of approaches. But just saying they are there and that they work has not been enough.

We have had to analyze why they work, using many very sophisticated processes. And this has not been easy, since even the individual teachers--those marvelous people who made the programs work--could not, in many instances, tell us why. We had to find out how the programs were planned, who planned them, how planning related to implementation, who did the implementing, how the children were motivated, and to whom those in charge were accountable.

Our analysis of these programs thus far shows that there seem to be common elements to all good reading programs. Let me tell you what they are.

Right to Read found that people are indeed the most important factor in teaching children and adults how to read. We found that the school principal who is concerned about relating to people and concerned about improving reading in his schools is one of the basic criteria for any good reading program.

For it is the principal who creates the atmosphere for change, who sets the tone for his school, and who sets the level of expectation on the part of both the teachers and the students.

A second element we found in good reading programs was that the program itself was identified with the local school and the local school staff. It was planned by them and they had some relationship with it before it came into being.

A third common element we found universally was that there was community and parental participation in the program. And the fourth, of course, was that the program involved a teacher whose concerns for the individuality of her children were coupled with skills in teaching reading. For only such a teacher, one who expects high achievement from each of her students, can truly motivate that kind of achievement in them.

We also found that each successful reading program we encounteres was a comprehensive one, which addressed the multiple aspects of the reading act itself. It did not relate just to the linguistic approach, or word attack skills, but included the range of skills which children must obtain if they are to read well.

Children in these programs had all of the oral communications. They all had word attack skills. They all had word attack skills. They all had critical thinking. They all were made to relate to an attitude of self-concept.

Each successful reading program also offered a diversity of materials to the students and each had a definitive reading methodology. In other words, the program had a theoretical base and the children understood it. Each program also contained some measure of self-selection on the part of the children involved. The students themselves were involved in the selection of some of the materials which they utilized in the classrooms.

It is this kind of vital information we have disseminated to those in the field--those who are planning to revamp their existing programs.

And they--the school officials--have been careful to keep the community around them informed of and involved in what they are doing. Such involvement is vital to a successful program because no program can be completely successful without the cooperation of people outside the regular educational establishment.

Part of the reason for that is because the schools in the United States belong to the community and therefore there is a higher level of consciousness about the role of education in this country. We have been called into question over recent years--and rightfully so--for not having involved the community enough in our decisions. Right to Read has not made that mistake.

We have seen all kinds of curriculum guides, instructional material, functional literacy pamphlets, and booklets aimed specifically for minority groups while other have been designed for those interested in bilingual instruction. All of these have found their way into the elementary and secondary and adult programs of Right to Read. And the community has, in each case, been involved in the development of them.

I would like to take this opportunity to applaud you, out in the field, who have made Right to Read what it is today. We can set policies and criteria here in Washington. But it is you who must turn these programs that work.

We need to share this information in that it will make a difference. We hope that the demonstrations will become lighthouses whose beacon lights will shine on other districts and even whole states.

We are pleased that superintendents from major Right to Read districts will be meeting in February to discuss how they can help spread Right to Read district-wide. This is one of the methods we hope to utilize to attain our goal. But we will need others.

Another challenge I want you to discuss is how to use the finds from the multitude of research that has already been conducted into reading, and translate those concepts into workable programs. If we are to move beyond the demonstration mode to major diffusion activities which affect massive numbers and mobilize the resources in these United States - that is human, technological and financial resources. The question then is what can the Right to Read Effort urge and encourage? How can our current activities be shared broadly? How can we turn on the nation to the extent of and solutions to the problem? With the Right to Read 500 and that's all of us here - Can we somehow break out of our project status and become disseminators, innovators and leaders to eliminate illiteracy.

Let's explore a few practices and policies which could profoundly affect the education of children and adults.

One of the lessons from the 60's is that peer teaching is an effective mechanism for both the tutor and the tutee. Why then shouldn't every school establish programs in which children can engage in each one--teach one efforts. Can you imagine exciting reading help provided after school in libraries and centers of learning.

The area of pre-school is another which begs out attention. If all the pre-schools developed viable language and oral communication components, can you imagine the real impact on the formalized schools.

In recent years we have learned much from bilingual instruction. We have seen laws enacted to all instruction in two languages, but more important as educators we have finally recognized that children have a right to retain and utilize their native language and culture, thereby giving credence to the concept of positiveness through cultural diversity.

In terms of parents, we are fully cognizance of the relationship between performance and parental participation. Can we find a meaningful way to involve parents in the education process with the recognition that parents have both the right and the responsibility to participate in their child's education.

As for adults, they too should have the same rights as children. Right to Read will soon launch the Right to Read Academies by stimulating one year of public service on the part of citizens to teach one person. Can you imagine what would happen if each one of those graduates promised to spend a few hours a week teaching someone else to read? Programs of this sort are already operating in some other countries which have embarked on literacy campaigns, so the idea is not that far-fetched. What do you think of that idea? And how can we make it work in this country?

My own feeling is that we simply must move beyond remediation to stronger developmental programs that include more enrichment than most programs now offer. I feel that we must also focus not only on those who cannot read, but those who have chosen not to do so. But I would like your reactions to that, too.

Many school people have inquired of Right to Read as to ways of becoming a Right to Read school in the absence of grants and technical assistance. Achieving the Right to Read for all means providing access and opportunity for boys and girls, men and women to maximize their reading/literacy skills so as to take advantage of the many options available to the reading public. Therefore, many schools and communities adhere to the principles and precepts of the national Right to Read Effort. I am especially pleased to share with you specific ways in which schools through the country have exemplified the Right to Read.

- Hundreds of elementary and secondary schools have utilized the needs assessment and program planning materials in an effort to determine the status of the reading in the school - i.e. the performance levels, teacher/student organization, reading approaches and methodologies, techniques of instruction, grouping patterns, evaluation.

- Large numbers of schools are beginning to establish Right to Read clubs and designating a Right to Read day, week or month.

- Parents are becoming significantly involved in the reading activities and are aiding in improvement of reading both at home and schools.

- Peer tutoring programs using similar age and older youth are proving to be as helpful to the tutor as the tutee.

- In an effort at motivation a number of schools have established a short period a day when everyone reads.

- School administrators are taking the lead in placing high priority on reading and reviewing and modifying the total schools' programs.

- School leadership teams are establishing unit task forces to assess and monitor reading activities.

- Many local educators are reaching out to organizations and industry to expand their input to the schools reading thrusts.

- Local awards for reaching progress are frequently provided to either schools or individuals.

- School and communities have initiated Reading is Fundamental projects and other activities to get books into the hands of children.

- Volunteers are being utilized in a wide variety of ways to assist children with reading improvement.

Let me give you some other problem areas to talk about. What can we do better to make sure teachers coming out of colleges and universities are good reading teachers. We already have guidelines for development of demonstration programs in this area but what else can we do?

Still another concern is where are we to get the massive numbers of teachers needed to do the job? Well, Americas colleges and universities graduate some 800,000 students each year. Presumably these are literate people and generally, devoted people anxious to help others.

While we're at it, why not utilize young people in high school and college who haven't graduated yet? Is there any reason a school cannot embark on a program to engage young people to work with other young people for the improvement of reading?

We in Right to Read have already met with some of the various agencies and are in the process of developing a plan whereby eight or ten of them--the U.S. Department of Labor and HUD, for example--will develop their own programs for helping solve the reading problem.

Right to Read is also in the final stages of developing an adult television program which we hope will be as popular with them as Sesame Street and the Electric Company have been with the youngsters.

We have met with the presidents and staff of major industrial corporations and have solicited their support for our cause. We have found them, for the most part, vitally interested and eager to help us wipe out illiteracy. For they know that a functionally literate citizen has a lot more earnings and buying power than an illiterate one.

We have come together today to decide where we go from here. We will have to set some priorities soon, and I wanted to have your thinking on them

before we here in Washington act.

As you gather in your various sessions today and tomorrow, you will be discussing the gamut of problems and challenges that face us in the years ahead. I want to highlight a few of them now, so that you can give them special attention in your discussions.

One of our most important missions is going to continue to be developing ways of utilizing what we have already learned. We simply must come up with better strategies for utilizing our demonstration programs, both at the state and national levels.

Of course not! It's happening already in some places. But how can we help it happen all over?

And what about the use of volunteer adult aides? We in Right to Read are about to start a new program of Adult Academies which will utilize just such volunteers to teach functional illiterates in a variety of new centers, such as libraries, storefronts, and classrooms loaned by business and industry. How else can we utilize volunteers in our adult programs?

As you begin your discussions, I urge you to remember that little essay I read to you. Think positively, for I am positive that the answers to our questions are out there, right out there in this audience.

Just remember that Right to Read must look at changing substance, not just style. We must be sure that we promote real change, not just gimmics.

What we, in Right to Read, want from you is successful programs that must be based on real, substantive change.

The problem of reading and illiteracy in the country is huge. But all you have to do is look around this room to see that the talent in this country is also immense.

We can do it, working together. And I look forward to your recommendations.

Thank you.